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William Gilpin and Nature

The focus of the present article is the theme of nature in William Gilpin's writings. The aim is to show that Gilpin, an 18th-century writer, amateur painter and art theoretician praised nature for its aesthetic value and made it a standard of artistic creation. Gilpin, as his biographer, Paul Barbier puts it, "throughout his life [...] remained interested in art and nature, explaining one in terms of the other [...]."¹ An artist, Gilpin believed, was to derive ideas, themes, and forms from nature. Gilpin's lifelong passion for nature and art and his efforts to establish aesthetic theory which links art to nature is an important theme of this article. However, I will also show that Gilpin would often favour nature and respect it more than art. As Barbier puts it, "it is broadly true to say that his interests gradually shifted from art to nature, from prints to paintings and other works of art and from these to natural scenery."²

Nature, its position in relation to art and its prominent place in Gilpin's system of values are discussed against the background of two important issues to which he refers in his texts: the aesthetic category of the picturesque and idea of picturesque travel.

Nature and the theory of the picturesque

Gilpin is probably best known as the originator of an aesthetic theory whose central issue, the picturesque beauty, is the criterion for art.

¹ Carl Paul Barier, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 49.

² Barier, *William Gilpin*, p. 49.

Picturesque beauty is supposed to be the end of artistic creation;³ and this kind of beauty has its source in nature. As Gilpin observes, the charms and attractiveness of the natural scenery are “the source of beauty.”⁴ Therefore nature, from which picturesque beauty proceeds, must be the perfect model for a painter.

Nature, which for its aesthetic merit was recommended by Gilpin to artists, became the focal point of his aesthetic theory, which in itself was a great praise of nature. That Gilpin’s theory of the picturesque was a kind of homage paid to nature is the topic of the current part of the article.

Gilpin proposes a definition for *picturesque beauty* which at first may sound as a strong denial of any links of that kind of beauty with nature. He defines the picturesque as a “quality in objects” which makes them pleasing in painting; picturesque forms and scenes are those which “please from some quality [and are] capable of being illustrated in painting.”⁵ Picturesque beauty is set in contrast to nature’s beauty. Natural beauty is characterised as the capacity of objects and scenes to “please the eye in their natural state.”⁶ Hence, *natural beauty* makes things pleasing in nature while *picturesque beauty*, in representation. The things and scenes which we admire in nature may not be aesthetically pleasing on the canvas, therefore as Gilpin puts it, “Nothing is more delusive than to suppose, that every view, which pleases in nature, will please in painting.”⁷

Indeed, picturesque beauty is not synonymous with natural beauty; yet, from Gilpin’s definition of the picturesque, it follows that even though picturesque beauty is not the same as the beauty of nature it has its foundation in the natural world, for forms and scenes pleasing in representation are taken and copied from nature. They are those objects

³ That beauty is an object of art seems to be a truism. However, as Tatarkiewicz explains, the view that beauty is the essence of art is a late development. It dates back to 1747 a (theory of Charles Batteaux). Furthermore, the idea that art has beauty for its purpose became outmoded in the early 20th century with the advent of the avant guard. Art started to be identified with novelty, originality rather than with beauty. A work of art was to shock rather than to please. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2011), pp. 10–12.

⁴ William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: With a Poem on Landscape Painting. To These are Now Added, Two Essays Giving an Account of the Principles and Mode in which the Author Executed His Own Drawings* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, Strand, 1808), p. III.

⁵ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 3.

⁶ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 3.

⁷ William Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of England, Particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland Relative to Picturesque Beauty, Made In the Year 1772* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, Strand, 1808), p. 154.

and scenes from nature which, due to their “peculiar construction”⁸ turn out nice to the eye when copied on canvas. It is therefore correct, from the perspective of Gilpin’s aesthetic theory, to believe that artists ought to seek inspiration in nature if their aim is to create beautiful things.

The artist then is advised to follow nature with one restriction only. Out of nature’s infinite variety he is supposed to select those portions of it which are characterised by a peculiar “construction”⁹ that makes them “suited to the pencil.”¹⁰ Gilpin explains the notion of the picturesque both with reference to *particular objects* and to *entire scenes*. I will follow him in both subjects to show that both single objects and whole natural scenes have a certain disposition which makes them proper models for painting.

Discussing *single objects* in nature Gilpin declares that roughness is the “quality”¹¹ which makes them picturesque. It is the rough objects which the artist ought to pursue in nature. “Roughness, claims Gilpin, [...] seems to be that particular quality, which makes objects chiefly pleasing in painting – I use the general term roughness; but properly speaking roughness relates only to the surfaces of bodies: when we speak of their delineation we use the word ruggedness. Both ideas however equally enter into the picturesque; and most are observable in the smaller, as well as in the larger parts of nature – in the outline, and bark of a tree, as in the rude summit, and craggy sides of a mountain.”¹² The most appropriate model for the canvas are objects characterised by hard lines, irregular in shape and of uneven rugged surfaces. All these forms are present in the world outdoors and are meant to be observed by the artist and inspire him.

As the picturesque originates in nature, this is where the artist ought to seek his objects suitable for the pencil. “We acknowledge nature to be the grand storehouse of all picturesque beauty,”¹³ says Gilpin. “The nearer we copy her,” he continues, “the nearer we approach perfection.”¹⁴ The secret of good art then lies in the artist’s acute observation of nature and his ability to select its most picturesque objects.

As regards *whole scenes*, which are also sources of picturesque beauty and therefore Gilpin strongly recommends representing them in painting. It is not his intention, however, to encourage an artist to copy a natural

⁸ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 4.

⁹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. x.

¹¹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 4.

¹² Gilpin, *Three Essays*, pp. 6–7.

¹³ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 159.

¹⁴ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 159.

view with “painful exactness,”¹⁵ because hardly any landscape agreeable in nature is equally captivating on canvas. The reservation that not all natural beauty is simultaneously picturesque beauty, which has been made in reference to single objects, is also valid with respect to outdoor scenes. Nature does not supply a painter with ready-made scenes to duplicate on the canvas but unfolds in front of his eyes prospects of incredible *natural beauty*, in which, however, the *picturesque beauty* is dormant. This picturesque potential, though not fully realised, needs to be developed by the painter, who adjusts the landscape to the requirements of the canvas. A natural scene then, is a good model which only needs refinement.

In the case of an entire scene, the quality of picturesque can be fully realised no sooner than its range of colours, its light and shade, and its composition is so processed as to make it consistent with the detailed demands discussed by Gilpin in his highly specialised tips for painters.¹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article, however, to focus on Gilpin’s extended system of technical requirements which a landscape “suited to the pencil”¹⁷ ought to meet.¹⁸ It is enough to state that in a natural scene the palette of colours, the distribution of light and shade and the arrangement of elements in the foreground, middle ground and distance is often, though not always, in agreement with the principles of Gilpin’s theory of the picturesque.¹⁹ Should any flaws occur in colouring, chiaroscuro or composition, an artist will correct them, and make the scene perfectly suited to the requirements of art.

Outdoor views are the most relevant sources of inspiration for an artist because they almost always adhere to all but one of Gilpin’s formal principles. The rule of composition is the one most frequently neglected by nature and it is in composition that the painter ought to make the necessary amendments. The deficiency of natural scenes in this particular aspect is discussed in *The Observations on the River Wye*. “Nature is always,” says Gilpin, “great in design. She is an admirable colourist also; and harmonises tints with great variety and beauty. But she is seldom so correct in composition, as to produce an harmonious whole. Either the foreground, or the background, is disproportioned: or some awkward line runs across the piece: or a tree is ill placed: or a bank is formal: or something other is not exactly as it should be. [...] Hence

¹⁵ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 160.

¹⁶ Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of England*, pp. 87–128.

¹⁷ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. X.

¹⁸ A comprehensive study of these rules is in Barbier, *William Gilpin*, pp. 98–148.

¹⁹ For in “such immense bodies [vast prospects] [...] many irregularities and even deformities may exist.” Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of England*, p. 127.

therefore, the painter, who adheres strictly to the composition of nature will rarely make a good picture.”²⁰ Weaknesses in composition in a plain air scene should discourage the artist from being a slavish imitator, but not from taking nature as the basic material for his representation. For the scene in nature is, on the whole, well fitted to the requirements of art. Faulty composition is the only imperfection in an otherwise perfect whole.

An artist, however, must not allow himself too much freedom when he amends the badly composed scene. He must correct it where it diverges in its composition from the picturesque ideal, yet he must not “mislead his eye from nature,”²¹ which is his basic standard. He is advised to use imagination to correct the imperfections but to refrain from indulging in it. As Gilpin puts it, “with all its magnificence and beauty, it cannot be supposed that every scene, which these countries present is correctly picturesque. [...] By the force of this creative power²² an intervening hill may turn aside; and a distance introduced. This ill shaped mountain may be pared and formed into a better line. To that on the opposite side, a lightness may be given by the addition of a higher summit [...].”²³ Imagination amends the scene (its composition) by modifying or reshuffling the existing elements or by pruning or by adding some new forms that the artist knows from his past experience. Nonetheless, it does not go so far as to insert fantastic constructs that are not possible to exist in nature.

Recombination, the rearrangement of the existing elements, and manipulation of structures existing in the natural world is all that needs to be done to put a scene right and make it fully picturesque (i.e. pleasing in painting). To perfect the flaws which make the original scene at odds with the formal requirements of the canvas, imagination, says Gilpin, is expected to “form its pictures [...] from the most admirable parts of nature.”²⁴ It is thus still nature that remains the archetype for the painted scene.

At times Gilpin is inconsistent in his views and contradicts his opinion that natural scenes are not fully picturesque. He occasionally insists that nature does adhere to the picturesque standard and is perfect even in its composition. It is man, the viewer, who cannot see it due to his

²⁰ William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c: Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (London: R. Blamire, in the Strand, 1789), p. 31.

²¹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 2.

²² “Power” means here imagination.

²³ Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of England*, pp. 127–128.

²⁴ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 52.

cognitive limitations. In *Observations on the River Wye* Gilpin explains that “The immensity of nature is beyond human comprehension. She works on a vast scale; and, no doubt, harmoniously, if her schemes could be comprehended. The artist, in the meantime, is confined to a span; and lays down his little rules, which he calls the principles of picturesque beauty, merely to adapt such diminutive parts of nature’s surfaces to his own eye, as to come within its scope.”²⁵ Nature is infallible in its composition. Still we often find its composition imperfect because, due to our limited perception, we cannot comprehend the whole designs of nature’s immense scenes. We embrace only their fragments. So does the artist, who cuts out a part of a larger design, and, mistakenly taking a part for the whole, declares its composition faulty. Trying to copy it he must correct the composition and turn a piece torn from a larger context into one harmonious, well composed whole.

The artist sometimes is able to comprehend the entire broad scene within the range of his view and appreciates it as a well composed whole. But in attempting to resize this huge entity and adapt it to a small format of the canvas he does harm to the scene, whose power and magnificence is in its colossal shape. The difficulties that arise when one tries to draw an extensive, sublime view on a small sheet of paper are referred to in *Observations on Several Parts of England*. On his way through Furness, Cumberland, Gilpin reports his experience of a wonderful, majestic view. “This great scene,” Gilpin observes, “was too extensive for the painter’s use. A small portion of the circle reduced to paper, or canvas, could have conveyed no idea, and a large segment would have excelled all the powers of the pallet. [...] It is,” continues Gilpin, “an error in landscape painting to comprehend too much. It turns a picture into a map.”²⁶ A grand, impressive scene squeezed into a small format will have the passionless appearance of a survey.²⁷ The artist then is expected to represent on canvas only a fragment of a too large scene and accept that, by doing so, he will have to face the aforementioned problem of composition. A portion torn out of the larger compositional design will need corrections to become a well composed entity. The composition of a scene in painting requires retouching, but not because the landscape in nature is badly composed but because it is a challenge for an artist to translate the natural view into a painting.

²⁵ Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, p. 64.

²⁶ Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of England*, p. 154.

²⁷ Gilpin may be referring here to surveys and to the topographical landscape. Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, pp. 32–43. Gilpin, *Observations on Several Parts of England*, p. 135.

To sum up, composition is believed by Gilpin to be the only ingredient of a natural view which does not fulfil his precepts of the picturesque. On closer examination it turns out that it is not the composition of the outdoor scene that disagrees with the rules, but that it is the disability of the perceiver to understand the compositional plan of an immense panorama or to accommodate the well composed whole on canvas. The natural scene in itself can be perfectly picturesque or close to the picturesque ideal. If it has flaws in composition, it requires help from the artist, whose reasonable amendments make it eventually fulfil the picturesque standards.

In regard to single objects, some of them are more picturesque than others and it is the artist's role to choose the proper ones. Rough forms are to be selected from the variety offered by nature.

To paint single objects as well as entire scenes the artist ought to study outdoor scenes. He should draw inspiration from nature. He can pick out the best forms from nature or correct the imperfect ones but he is not supposed to construct anything that cannot exist in nature. For nature, as Gilpin insists, is the "archetype"²⁸ for the painter. Adequately treated by the artist it becomes picturesque, or "capable of being illustrated in painting."²⁹

Picturesque travel

That nature was for Gilpin an object of great admiration is not only testified in his picturesque aesthetic theory but also confirmed by his attitude of a traveller touring through the loveliest parts of Britain. The beauty of these regions was precious to him because it stimulated his artistic mind. Scenes and objects suitable for canvas were what he expected to find on these excursions, which he called "picturesque tours."³⁰ Clearly, then, his passion as a traveller and lover of nature was inextricably linked with his dedication to art.³¹ But no matter how strong his vocation of artist and his affection for art was, his keenness for nature itself, or what Barbier calls the basic instinct of a "countryman,"³² seemed to be equally powerful. Mountains and lakes were to Gilpin very dear, both as a nice place of solitude and as a trigger for his artistic endeavours; and his touring was a means of maintaining intimate contact with his beloved

²⁸ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 53.

²⁹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 3.

³⁰ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, pp. 41–42.

³¹ Barbier, *William Gilpin*, p. 49.

³² Barbier, *William Gilpin*, p. 49.

nature. That nature was the centre of attention for Gilpin as a landscape painter and a highly emotional man, is discussed here in the context of his picturesque tours. This context is to be the important point of reference in what follows.

A voyage through the most beautiful countryside became for Gilpin an occasion for enhancing his artistic craft through direct observation of nature and sketching outdoor scenes, which he later finished at home.³³ Touring and entrusting to nature the role of a drawing master, he was preparing the grounds for such painters as John Constable and William Turner, who went on tours not only to make sketches outdoors but even their finished works.³⁴ In Gilpin's times nature in the open was underrated as an object of study for an artist; at least it was so, as Maria Porzęcka claims, in academic circles.³⁵ Students at European academies of arts, might have been encouraged to sketch from nature³⁶ but the bulk of their knowledge about landscape was supposed to come not from nature in the open but from nature as represented by the Old Masters: Claude Lorrain, Nicholas Poussin and Salvator Rosa.³⁷ Gilpin did not neglect the art of the Old Masters³⁸ but he must have remained free from the prejudices of the Academy where the authority of the recognised painters of the past had priority over the authority of nature. As to Gilpin, immediate contact with nature in the open seems to have been crucial, which is confirmed by his extensive touring in the years 1768–1776³⁹ in search of picturesque scenes.

Indeed, without touring and intensive observation of the natural scene painting landscapes would not prove successful if one believes that only a scrupulous study of picturesque beauty, the beauty which is inherent in nature, can teach one how to paint. "In treating of picturesque travel we may consider first its object," claims Gilpin. "Its object is beauty of every kind, which either art or nature can produce: but it is chiefly that

³³ Barrier, *William Gilpin*, p. 41.

³⁴ Graham Reynolds, *Turner* (London: Thames & Hudson Word Art., 2000), pp. 174–175.

³⁵ Maria Porzęcka, *Akademizm* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Naukowe i Filmowe, 1989), p. 187.

³⁶ In academies of arts students were instructed to make several exercises or studies of nature (*etude*) before they painted a picture. Porzęcka, *Akademizm*, p. 69.

³⁷ Porzęcka, *Akademizm*, p. 187.

³⁸ "The picturesque tourist could, and did, step from the picture galleries of country houses out on the terraces and was there able to compare the efforts of nature to the supposedly more exalted ones of the masters of the past." Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 45. Gilpin describes his visits to country houses in *Observations on Several Parts of England*, pp. 23–24.

³⁹ See Barrier, *William Gilpin*, p. 49.

species of beauty which we have endeavoured to characterise [...] under the name picturesque. This great object we pursue through the scenery of nature. We seek it among all the ingredients of landscape – trees – rocks – broken grounds – woods – rivers – lakes – valleys – mountains – and distances.”⁴⁰ One is encouraged to travel with the aim of picking out picturesque forms scattered in nature to equip his memory with images suitable for the canvas or to sketch them on the spot. A knowledge of picturesque beauty, which is essential to a landscape painter, could not come without its frequent observation in nature.

Gilpin, though he urged painters to study nature on tours, was not however, the first to combine touring with drawing. Sketching from nature on a journey has been practised at least since the 17th century for different purposes, though not necessarily did it have anything to do with the search for the picturesque. Many Dutch draughtsmen, some of whom visited England, travelled to draw paintings and sketches of different places so as to contribute to books of travel which were sold to readers in Europe.⁴¹ There was a Prague born engraver-printer Wenceslaus Hollar, who spent much of his life in England drawing prospects of London, English castles and buildings for different publishers. He had also travelled in 1636 as a draughtsman documentalist on an ambassadorial expedition through Germany with statesman Lord Arundel in 1636.⁴² Also among the British there were artists who were travelling and drawing to contribute to tourist guides, books on the history of a region or documentation of scholarly expeditions. A draughtsman associated with England and Ireland, Francis Place, was employed to make prints of London. Later he made topographic drawings of York during his numerous errands and had them published in a book on the history of that city (1736).⁴³ A Londoner William Pars was hired as a professional draughtsman by a crew of antiquarians and, accompanying them on their way to Italy was to record traces of past civilisations.⁴⁴ Paul Sandby, who later became a known English watercolour landscape painter, had been travelling over the Scottish Highlands in 1747 to make a draft of a map of that area on commission from the English army, which planned to survey Scotland after the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745. Draughtsmen working for the army, for publishers or for travelling statesmen, scholars and antiquarians, were supposed to produce an “accurate representation of what they and their fellow voyagers had seen.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 42.

⁴¹ Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 21.

⁴² Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 23.

⁴³ Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 56.

They were topographers, mapmakers, documentalists, students of the fact rather than seekers of picturesque beauty in nature.

The popularisation of travel in search of picturesque beauty was the initiative of Gilpin and his colleagues. It was Gilpin and several other painters such as Abbot White and Joseph Farrington who, through their pictures and journals were promoting travelling with the object of seeking aesthetic elements in nature⁴⁶ rather than attempting to record topographic truth. Thus conceived picturesque travel, which was associated with the study of nature's beauty suitable for canvas, was initiated by Gilpin and the painters of his epoch,⁴⁷ and meant that nature outdoors rather than the nature copied in the studio from the paintings of Claude and the Old Masters was gradually becoming the focus of landscape painters. This increasing interest in nature as an object of artist's scrutiny undoubtedly evolved from the tradition of the picturesque travel of which Gilpin, among others, was an originator.

As to Gilpin, his view that an observation of nature is fundamental for a landscape painter certainly resulted from his enchantment with its picturesqueness and with its general aesthetic merit. But his appreciation of nature's captivating power seems to have gone even further than that. He was not simply attracted to nature because of his aspirations as a landscape painter but because he loved it on its own account. It was not only a desire to spot in nature motifs for his pictures that motivated Gilpin to spend time outdoors and to travel. He took his excursions also for the mere pleasure of contemplating natural beauty. For nature, with its charms enunciated from him an emotional response and thus became worthy of love and admiration in its own sake.

The effects that walking through scenes of natural beauty can have on the traveller's psyche are discussed in *Three Essays* in a lengthy quasi-psychological discourse. Various emotional reactions are mentioned as arising from the different stages of the pursuit of picturesque beauty. Gilpin subsumes these stages and the connected feelings under the heading "sources of amusement."⁴⁸ A source of amusement can be, for instance, "the pursuit of the object – the expectation of new scenes continually opening, and arising to his view [...] the agreeable suspension [...] the love of novelty."⁴⁹ A viewer may derive amusement from the feeling of joyful tension when he is continually surprised by new scenes opening before him as he progresses on his journey. Another source of amusement

⁴⁶ Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ Clarke, *The Tempting Prospect*, pp. 32–37.

⁴⁸ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, pp. 41, 47–48.

⁴⁹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 47.

is “the attainment of the object”⁵⁰ or the delight from reaching a beautiful scene that had attracted a traveller from afar.

Both these amusements have their origin in the traveller’s dialogue with nature. If the touring artist is so involved in such an emotional interaction with nature he certainly sees in it more than the subject matter for his paintings. Nature is not approached merely in a somewhat technical manner as an integral part of the artist’s craft, or visual material for sketches and watercolours. Conversely, nature in itself, as Gilpin insisted, can be the traveller’s great source of amusement, an object triggering strong positive affections.

If nature *per se* becomes an object of affectionate feeling it seems best to enjoy contact with it in its pure state, unaltered by human activity, untainted by the artificial products of civilisation. Artefacts such as huts, fences, churches, scattered around the landscape, stand on the way between the picturesque traveller and his beloved nature. “There are few parts of nature, explains Gilpin, “which do not yield a picturesque eye some amusement. Although the picturesque traveller is seldom disappointed with pure nature, however rude, yet we cannot deny, but he is often offended with the productions of art. He is disgusted with the formal separations of property – with houses, and towns, the haunts of men, which have much oftener a bad effect in landscape, than a good one.”⁵¹ Even the least beautiful regions of wilderness are often of extreme beauty when compared to those parts of the landscape where civilisation marked its traces. Wilderness, i.e. nature “untouched by [the] civilising hand of man,”⁵² is what gives the picturesque traveller the greatest amusement.

Giving so much ecstatic joy to an observer such an unadulterated landscape is preferred to any view of cultivated nature. Only if the picturesque traveller wants not only to feed his senses but also to record the scene, should he chose for his painting civilised land or supplement a wild one with architectonic structures from the deposit of his memory. A painted landscape requires churches or abbeys for the sake of its composition. But a natural landscape as an object of perceiver’s mere adoration and amusement is better without any human improvement. As Gilpin puts it, “abbeys, castles, villages, spires, forges, mills, and bridges [...] are [...] of great more use in artificial, than in natural landscape. In pursuing the beauties of nature, we range at large among forests, lakes, rocks, and mountains. The various scenes we meet with, furnish

⁵⁰ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 48.

⁵¹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 56.

⁵² Barbier, *William Gilpin*, pp. 22–23.

an inexhaustible source of pleasure. And tho the works of art⁵³ may often give animation and contrast to these scenes, yet still they are not necessary. We can be amused without them.”⁵⁴ Contemplation of natural scenes, turns out to be no less important an aim of picturesque travel than exploration of nature in search of themes for the canvas. Nature as the object of mere “amusement” makes the traveller feel delighted when he contemplates its virgin beauty.

Gilpin’s years of touring through the countryside and wild regions of Britain testify to his strong need of intensive contact with nature. As a picturesque traveller of artistic aspirations he went on his journeys to make studies from nature. He made a great number of preparatory sketches in the open; he did not overestimate ready-made material in the works of the Old Masters. Furthermore, his travels were taken up not merely to advance his artistic craft but also to draw “amusement” from intimate contact with nature in its own right. Finally, when he was on tour, he was happiest when he contemplated nature uncultivated.

Gilpin and Shaftesbury

Why Gilpin loved nature and why he found particular delight in the contemplation of untamed wilderness can be explained by his sensitivity but also by some external factors that formed his worldview. One such influence was the philosophy of Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury viewed nature as God’s creation and, since he found it infinitely beautiful and perfectly designed, he celebrated its divine creator as the best of artists. Uncultivated nature, such as it was originally created by God, was, in Shaftesbury’s opinion, infinitely more beautiful than the nature changed by man’s activity. It is that part of Shaftesbury’s philosophy that reverberates, as Barbier explains, in Gilpin’s reflections on the picturesque traveller’s predilection for wide open spaces not modified by human activity.⁵⁵ It is on the Shaftesburian influence that I focus now to show what contributed to Gilpin’s stance concerning nature and what sparked in him a primeval longing for rude uncivilised nature.

Gilpin often repeats ideas presented in Shaftesbury’s essay “The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody,” which is a part of the monumental work *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Times*. Shaftesbury reflects there on the inopportune efforts of man to change nature by art. “I shall no

⁵³ By “works of art” Gilpin means any traces of human activity: abbeys, cottages, fields, fences.

⁵⁴ Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Barbier, *William Gilpin*, p. 22.

longer resist the passion growing in me for things of a natural kind," he observes, "where neither art nor the conceit or caprice of man has spoiled their genuine order by breaking in upon that primitive state. Even the rude rocks, the mossy caverns, the regular unwrought grottos and broken falls of waters, with all the horrid graces of the wilderness itself, as representing Nature more, will be the more engaging, and appear with a magnificence beyond the formal mockery of princely gardens."⁵⁶ Man turns wilderness into a garden by adjusting it to a design drafted by a landscape architect.⁵⁷ Still, no matter how beautiful a carefully planned garden can be, it will not emulate the beauty of the original wild scene; primal landscape wins against a landscape changed by man. This idea of Shaftesbury is echoed in Gilpin's *Three Essays*. Gilpin claims that a picturesque traveller "is frequently disgusted [...] when art aims more beauty, than she ought. How flat, and insipid is often the garden scene; how puerile, and absurd! The banks of the river how smooth, and parallel? The lawn and its boundaries, how unlike nature. [...] The more refined our taste grows from the study of nature, the more insipid are the works of art."⁵⁸ When man, led by his artistic aspirations and his trust in civilisation attempts to tame nature and transform it into the regular scheme of a garden, to regulate river banks and cramp wild growing grass into the shape of a lawn, the effect is disappointing. Nature on its own is aesthetically pleasing and needs not to be interfered with. In this respect Gilpin and Shaftesbury agree.

The love of a barren scene declared in the aforementioned passage from Shaftesbury's "Moralists" is echoed many times in Gilpin's writings. Gilpin extends Shaftesbury's criticism of gardening and landscape architecture to all forms of human activity that result in the modification of nature. He must have had in mind the teachings of Shaftesbury when he was speaking ill of any signs of civilisation in landscape, such as huts, fences, villages and cultivated ground and when he was extolling the pleasures which the picturesque traveller derives from contemplating the primal beauty of prospects remote from human estates.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Times* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Company, Inc., 1964), vol. 2, p. 125.

⁵⁷ Landscape gardening in the 18th century had the status of a very important art. James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700–1789* (London and New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1993), pp. 179–191.

⁵⁸ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, p. 22. William Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 56.

Respect for nature, not yet flawed by civilisation, has theological grounds in Gilpin; in this matter Gilpin owes much to Shaftesbury. Like Shaftesbury he regards nature in its raw state as perfect because wild nature is the work of God, the perfect being and supreme creator.

Something to that effect is instilled in the reader of Shaftesbury's "Moralists." Shaftesbury claims that "All Nature's wonders serve to excite and perfect this idea of their author. [...] how glorious is it to contemplate him in this noblest of his works apparent to us, the system of the bigger world."⁶⁰ Both as wilderness and as "bigger system," that is, the system of the universe, nature is characterised by ultimate harmony and beauty since it is a work of the perfect maker, the divine creator. God for Shaftesbury is the supreme artist and nature the most excellent work of art, exceeding anything that man is able to create. If we contemplate loveliness and the ideal arrangement of the natural world we finally discover its cause, God himself. As Shaftesbury puts it, "if we may trust what our reasoning has taught us, whatever in Nature is beautiful or charming is only the faint shadow of that first beauty. So that every real love depending on the mind, and being only the contemplation of beauty either as it really is in itself or as it appears imperfectly in the objects which strike the sense, how can the rational mind rest here, or be satisfied with the absurd enjoyment which reaches the sense alone?"⁶¹ The aesthetic pleasure which we experience in contemplating nature, the divine work of art, elevates our minds to God, who is, according to Shaftesbury, the essence of beauty and the original form from which all beautiful forms on earth proceed.⁶²

We find an equivalent of Shaftesbury's argument aimed at explaining nature's perfection in Gilpin's *Three Essays*. Gilpin, in Shaftesbury's spirit, insists that nature as it came from God's hand, is the work of the best maker. The author of *Three Essays*, like Shaftesbury, deduces perfection of nature from the perfection of God and claims that from the beauty of nature we can infer the idea of its creator. It is the notion of God that may become the ultimate aim of the picturesque traveller once he becomes aware that God is the fountainhead of beauty after which he searches in nature. The picturesque traveller tours with the intention

⁶⁰ Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, p. 122.

⁶¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, p. 126.

⁶² Shaftesbury's philosophical roots are in Platonism. Stanley Green, "Introduction," in Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Times* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Company, Inc., 1964), p. XXII. Plato in his *Symposium* and in *Phaedrus* addresses the contemplation of the beauty of the sensual world which leads to the divine Idea of Beauty, the source of all beautiful forms in the natural world (*Symposium* 210a–212b, *Phaedrus* 245c–254e).

of finding “beauty of every kind [...] chiefly that species of beauty” which Gilpin calls “picturesque.”⁶³ In this pursuit of beauty in nature, the traveller “might observe that a search after beauty would naturally lead the mind to the great origin of all beauty; to the first good, first perfect, and first: fair (i.e. to its First Cause).”⁶⁴ In other words, the search for natural beauty may lead to the final revelation of its cause, the Divine Being. Nature is so pleasing – the traveller will conclude – and in this he will agree with Shaftesbury, because it was made by God himself, the greatest craftsman.

If the divine being created nature, the wild, the original work of God must be supreme to a landscape converted by man into a garden, a cultivated field, and a human estate with huts and fences. “When houses are scattered through every part [of a natural scene]” the prospect seems deformed.⁶⁵ Gilpin’s statement that a village with man-made constructions cannot stand in comparison with wilderness may be understood in the light of the idea that God is a better artist than man. This idea has much in common with the teachings of Lord Ashley.

The impact of Shaftesbury, who derives the beauty of natural scenery from God’s artistic talent seems to have been one of the factors which contributed to Gilpin’s religious reverence and admiration of crude nature.

Conclusions

Gilpin made nature central in his philosophy. A native of the most marvellous part of England, nurtured by Shaftesbury’s ideas, he became an enthusiast of the natural world. Nature was an important point in his aesthetic theory of the picturesque. It was considered as a source of the picturesque beauty and hence was supposed to be the archetype for landscape painters. Painters should wisely select from nature the scenes that are the most picturesque, and the most proper for their artistic purpose. Apart from being a crucial value in Gilpin’s aesthetic theory of the picturesque, nature was also a place of his peregrinations. He undertook many tours, the so-called picturesque travels, because, as a landscape painter, he was restlessly pursuing picturesque forms in nature for his watercolours. However, he travelled not only with an intention to study nature for his paintings but also to contemplate its beauty for

⁶³ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 42.

⁶⁴ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 47. Barier pays attention to the Shaftesburian references in this fragment of *Three Essays*. Barbier, *William Gilpin*, pp. 103–104.

⁶⁵ Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, p. 12.

pleasure. Magnificent nature filled him with religious awe and raised his mind to the contemplation of the divine creator, whom he considered the best of the artists.

Marta Oracz

William Gilpin i natura

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie roli natury w twórczości Williama Gilpina w odniesieniu do jego koncepcji sztuki i teorii estetycznej *picturesque* oraz w kontekście jego podróży. Piękno natury było punktem wyjścia teorii *picturesque* Gilpina określającej zasady tworzenia pejzażu. Znaczenie terminu *picturesque* pokrywa się częściowo z zakresem znaczeniowym słowa piękny, lecz nie jest z nim tożsame. *Picturesque* to pojęcie węższe, określa szczególny rodzaj piękna. Jest to piękno sprawdzające się w sztuce. *Picturesque* to malowniczy, „dobrze prezentujący się na płótnie”. Gilpin podkreśla, że jedynym źródłem *picturesque* jest natura; zadaniem zaś artysty jest wyselekcjonowanie z przyrody tych jej form, których uroda spełnia wymogi sztuki. Natura jest skarbnicą malowniczych form i tym samym stanowi jedyny właściwy wzór dla malarza pejzażysty.

Przyroda, która z uwagi na swój walor *picturesque* była jedynym modelem dla artysty, pełniła u Gilpina jeszcze inną, dodatkową funkcję. Jej piękno było motorem wędrowek autora; Gilpin podziwiał uroki przyrody podczas wielotygodniowych wycieczek górskich, których ważnym celem była religijna kontemplacja dzikiej przyrody. Przyroda dziewczęca, niezmieniona ręką człowieka jawiła mu się jako najdoskonalsze dzieło Boże. W tej kwestii Gilpin był spadkobiercą filozofii Lorda Shaftesbury, który cenił piękno przyrody nieujarzmionej. Shaftesbury, a za nim Gilpin, dowodzi, że piękno natury nieskalanej cywilizacją to piękno doskonałe, ponieważ przyroda, pierwotna i nieprzetworzona przez człowieka jest oryginalnym dziełem Boga, doskonałego twórcy.

Marta Oracz

William Gilpin und die Natur

Zusammenfassung

Das vorliegende Essay bezweckt, die Rolle der Natur in William Gilpins Werken in Bezug auf seine Konzeption von der Kunst und der ästhetischen Theorie *picturesque* und auf seine Reisen darzustellen. Die Naturschönheit war der Ausgangspunkt für die, die Prinzipien der Landschaftsbilderschaffung bestimmende Theorie Gilpins. Die Bedeutung des Termins *picturesque* (dt.: *pittoresk*) deckt sich teilweise mit dem Bedeutungsumfang des Wortes „schön“, sie ist jedoch damit nicht identisch. *Picturesque* ist ein engerer Begriff, der eine besondere Art der sich in der Kunst bewahrheitenden Schönheit bezeichnet. *Picturesque* bedeutet pittoresk, malerisch, „gut auf der Leinwand aussehend“. Gilpin betont, dass die einzige Quelle von *picturesque* die Natur ist, und die Aufgabe des Künstler

ist, aus der Natur solche Elemente auszuwählen, deren Anmut den Kunstanforderungen entspricht. Die Natur ist eine richtige Fundgrube von malerischen Formen, so dass sie dem Landschaftsmaler als einziges richtiges Muster dienen sollte.

Wegen ihres *Pittoreskes* bildete die Natur ein einziges Modell für den Künstler und hatte bei Gilpin noch eine andere, zusätzliche Funktion. Die Naturschönheit regte Gilpin zu Wanderungen an; er bewunderte die Anmut der Landschaft während seiner mehrwöchigen Bergwanderungen, deren wichtiges Ziel die religiöse Kontemplation der wilden Natur war. Die unberührte Natur erschien ihm als ein vollkommenstes Gotteswerk; in dem Punkt war Gilpin der Erbe von der Philosophie des Earls of Shaftesbury, der die Schönheit der unbezwingbarer Natur zu schätzen wusste. Shaftesbury und Gilpin zeigten auf, dass die zivilisationsfreie Naturschönheit eine vollkommene Schönheit ist, denn die unberührte und von dem Menschen nicht verwandelte Natur ist ein originelles Werk vom Gott, dem absoluten Schöpfer.